

## [H-Diplo Roundtable on Fight or Flight: Britain, France, and their Roads from Empire \[16 March 2015\]](#)

Discussion published by George Fujii on Monday, March 16, 2015

H-Diplo Roundtable Review  
Volume XVI, No. 20 (2015)

Published by H-Diplo to the H-Net Commons on 16 March 2015, and accurate as of that date.

*Roundtable Editors:* Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse  
*Roundtable and Web Production Editor:* George Fujii  
Introduction by Christopher Goscha

**Martin Thomas.** *Fight or Flight: Britain, France, and their Roads from Empire.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-19-969827-1 (hardback, £25.00).

URL: <http://www.tiny.cc/Roundtable-XVI-20>

### Contents

- [Introduction by Christopher Goscha, Université du Québec à Montréal](#) 2
- [Review by Robert Aldrich, University of Sydney](#). 7
- [Review by Nicholas J. White, Liverpool John Moores University](#). 14
- [Review by Andrew Williams, University of St. Andrews](#). 18
- [Author's Response by Martin Thomas, University of Exeter](#). 21

© 2015 The Authors.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License](#).

Introduction by Christopher Goscha, Université du Québec à Montréal

One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era. By day it pursues its enemies. It is cunning and ruthless, it sends its bloodhounds everywhere. By night it feeds on images of disaster: the sack of cities, the rape of populations, pyramids of bones, acres of desolation.

-J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*<sup>u</sup>

In his Nobel prize-winning novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, J.M. Coetzee masterfully describes how

the agents and members of empire struggle incessantly against the imperial state's demise by creating a constant state of fear against barbarian attack. It is not enough to rule. The imperial state needs an enemy. It then marches the army into the borderlands to attack the nomads before they can descend upon the empire. The deployment of the army, the use of torture, and the suspension of rule of law are necessary evils. The preservation of civilization and of the white race depends on it. Empire simply cannot fathom its own end. And yet, throughout his novel, Coetzee has his borderland administrator remind us that all empires must one day perish. Imperial time, the Magistrate whispers ever so seditiously in our unsuspecting ears, is not universal: "We have been here more than a hundred years, we have reclaimed land from the desert and built irrigation works and planted fields and built solid homes and put a wall around our town, but they still think of us as visitors, transients." Driven almost mad by the failed military campaign against the barbarians he has come to admire, the Magistrate finally admits that he "wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them."<sup>2</sup> Our tortured colonial administrator had dared to imagine decolonization from the inside.

In the comparative study under review here, *Fight or Flight*, the talented and prolific British historian Martin Thomas provides an in-depth account of how and why the French and the British tried to hold on to their empires against all odds but in the end had to let go. Sometimes, Thomas tells us, the colonizers chose to cut their losses and get out in order to focus on other parts of the empire. It was a question of preservation. On other occasions, Thomas counters, they went to war to hold on to their prize possessions. In both cases, it -what we now call decolonization - was a messy, complicated, unpredictable, and terribly bloody business. There was no roadmap for ending empires because, at least in the immediate wake of World War II, neither the French nor the British decision-makers could fathom that imperial time was perhaps not universal.<sup>3</sup>

Nor could they imagine that the 'barbarians' were thinking of historical time in different terms and were willing to fight to force that change upon their colonizers. While Thomas's comparison turns on the French and British imperial endgames, he successfully weaves in the stories of the Africans and Asians. For many colonial nationalists, Thomas reminds us, decolonization did not magically begin in the wake of World War II; but emerged in many colonial minds as the only response to failed reformist promises. Nicholas White is right to suggest that Thomas is on to something big by suggesting that the colonial crisis that coalesced in the 1930s was as important as anything that came after '1945.' Some chose communism, like Ho Chi Minh, the future father of Vietnam, and Thomas shows how that pre-WWII communist connection would differentiate the French war of decolonization in Indochina from other 'fight experiences' in French Algeria and British Malaya.

All three reviewers praise Thomas for the breathtaking erudition with which he compares the French and British endgames. He deftly takes us into high-level cabinet debates, explains the politics and failures of colonial reformism, and shows how decolonization and the Cold War intermeshed in

complex ways. Thomas invites us at the same time to venture down below, explaining many of the socio-economic and even cultural forces that were at work from Indochina to Algeria by way of Malaysia and Rhodesia. Demographics, health, and labor issues all find their places in Thomas's account of the roads leading from empire. Nor does Thomas avoid the question of colonial violence, our reviewers tell us, treating it in a coolheaded yet honest manner. When the French and the British resolved to 'fight,' the costs in terms of Afro-Asian suffering and death was mindboggling.

All three reviewers agree on the importance of Thomas's book in the historiography of decolonization and international history. Robert Aldrich praises Thomas for showing the extent to which 'fight or flight' makes it clear that there was no "clear exit strategy from empire." He applauds Thomas's attention to the specific dynamics of each colonial situation, especially less-known ones such as in Madagascar, Cyprus, and Malaya. Other reviewers share that sentiment. Equally impressive for Aldrich is Thomas's ability to compare in new ways the violent endgames in French Indochina and British Indochina, though for Aldrich there is no doubt that "there was less bloodletting in the British experience than in the murderous wars in French Indochina and Algeria, but there are still stains on the record." If I have read Thomas correctly, he actually wants to say the opposite - that there was some sort of parity in the violence used by the French and British. Like Coetzee, Aldrich puts his finger on a third 'f' in explaining imperial decline, that of 'fear' - the colonial fear of "the specter of decline," the settler fear of "violence and death" and the fear of colonial populations debarking in the metropolis. On the latter note, Aldrich suggests that Thomas should have paid more attention to the emergence of new media like the radio and television as a way of moving beyond the decision-makers in Paris and London. Unlike the media of the nineteenth century, the twentieth century's television and radio brought Ho Chi Minh and postcolonial India's Jawaharlal Nehru into French and British sitting rooms and humanized them in unprecedented ways.

White likewise finds much to praise in Thomas's book, most notably the success the author achieves in comparing and contrasting the two imperial experiences. While there were differences in the Franco-British endgames, White salutes Thomas for putting to rest the myth that the British were somehow different or even better than the French when it came to managing the imperial endgame. Like Aldrich, White agrees with Thomas that, whatever their differences, the French and the British travelled down parallel roads to decolonization. And White agrees too that there was no user's guide for decolonization. It was a messy process, marked more by contingency than any sort of grand strategy. Like Aldrich, White suggest that the use of the term 'flight' comes with problems, however, because decolonization for the French and the British did not end in the early 1960s with Algeria for the French or Rhodesia for the British. The use of flight, White writes, "suggests a definite end point and no turning back. But often this was not how the British conceived of their withdrawals from New Delhi, Kuala Lumpur, or Lagos. It was hoped that there would be ongoing constructive engagement as a prop to British global influence ..." To make their point, both Aldrich and White provide interesting suggestions about similarities and very real differences in 'fight' and 'flight' strategies in Franco-British experiences after the 1960s (Aldrich's counterexample of New Caledonia and White's point about the Attlee government's attempt to keep India in the Commonwealth are thought-provoking.). Unlike Aldrich, White accepts Thomas's conclusion that "French violence was not that

exceptional either when compared with Britain's dirty war in Malaya."

Andrew Williams wholeheartedly agrees with White on this last point and concludes the roundtable with a strong endorsement of Thomas's slaying of the myth of 'bad French colonialists' and 'good British decolonizers.' With the 2011-2012 revelations of British torture clearly in mind,<sup>14</sup> Williams agrees with Thomas's effort to set the levels of colonial violence between the French and the British at the same level. And like the other reviewers, Williams salutes Thomas for underlining the commonalities instead of the differences between the French and British endgames. For him, Thomas has rendered students of British imperial history an invaluable service by taking the French and their colonial policies so seriously.

Students of French imperial history, I would also venture to say, will learn much about the British side from Thomas's *Fight or Flight*. And perhaps most importantly for readers of H-Diplo, Thomas has done us a major favor by providing a detailed but highly readable comparative account of French and British decolonization, one that connects decolonization not just to the Cold War and international relations, but also to global changes in demographics, migration, social change, and human rights and law. Moreover, if scholars plaster the word 'empire' on almost anything and everything today, often without serious theoretical reflection or sustained knowledge of their subject,<sup>15</sup> Thomas moves us solidly forwards in terms of understanding how empires end as historical phenomena in messy and unpredictable ways, as much for the colonizers as for the colonized. It is a complicated story, necessarily full of names, dates, and places; but it is also clearly written, well-organized and a jargon-free. General readers and students can dip in to the book at certain chapters to glean precise information while the specialists will gain much from staying the course. Indeed, those who take the time to read Martin Thomas's book carefully might just come away understanding a bit better that "one thought" Coetzee's mad colonial administrator saw at the heart of the "submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era."

### Participants:

**Martin Thomas** is Professor of European Imperial History and Director of the Centre for War, State, and Society at the University of Exeter. He has written extensively on colonial politics and patterns of dissent, including *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Control after 1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) and, with Bob Moore and L.J. Butler, *Crises of Empire. Decolonization and Europe's Imperial States, 1918-1975* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008).

**Christopher Goscha** is Professor of International Relations, Université du Québec à Montréal. His

most recent publication is *Vietnam: Un Etat né de la guerre (Vietnam, A State of War, 1945-1954)*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2011. He is presently writing a comparative book on kingship in the French colonial empire and finishing the *Penguin History of Vietnam*, which will appear in late 2015.

**Robert Aldrich** (BA Emory University, MA, Ph.D. Brandeis University) is Professor of European History at the University of Sydney. He has published widely on the history of colonialism, especially on the French overseas empire. Most recently, he has co-edited, with Kirsten McKenzie, *The Routledge History of Western Empires* (2014), and his *Cultural Encounters and Homoeroticism in Sri Lanka: Sex and Serendipity* will be published by Routledge later this year. He is currently working on a study of the deposition and exile of indigenous rulers by French and colonial authorities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia.

**Nicholas J. White** is Professor of Imperial & Commonwealth History in the School of Humanities & Social Science at Liverpool John Moores University. He received his Ph.D. from the University of London. His previous publications include *Business, Government, and the End of Empire: Malaya, 1942-57*. Oxford University Press, 1996; *British Business in Post-Colonial Malaysia, 1957-70: 'neo-colonialism' or 'disengagement'?* Routledge, 2004; and, *Decolonisation: the British experience since 1945*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Routledge, 2014. His current research interests are in the localisation of foreign firms in Malaysia in the 1970s and 1980s, the decline of the British merchant marine, and the impact of decolonisation on the international port city of Liverpool.

Andrew Williams has a Dr ès Sciences Politiques from the University of Geneva. He is Professor of International Relations at the University of St Andrews. His most recent books include: (with Amelia Hadfield and Simon Rofe) *International History and International Relations* (Routledge, 2012); *Liberalism and War: The Victors and the Vanquished* (Routledge, 2006) and *(Failed Imagination? New World Orders of the Twentieth Century* (Manchester University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2007); *France, Britain and the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: 1900 - 1940* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014). He is now working on a subsequent volume covering the years 1940 - 1990.

Review by Robert Aldrich, University of Sydney

"Fight or Flight", the title of Martin Thomas's new history of British and French decolonisation, dramatically sets out the alternatives facing policy-makers concerning European overseas possessions in the face of anti-colonialist militancy, diminishing support for empire at home, and changing international circumstances after the Second World War. Professor Thomas is one of the leading contemporary historians of international and colonial history - to his credit are books on the French empire in the interwar and wartime period, on Britain and France in North Africa, and on imperial intelligence and policing strategies.<sup>14</sup> Here he offers a comprehensive and rigorously parallel

analysis of the experiences of the world's two major colonial powers. By different routes, both London and Paris by the 1960s had largely arrived at the end of empire, a destination not envisaged in the early twentieth century, and an outcome hardly imaginable to the empire-builders of the nineteenth century.

Thomas's pages are splattered with blood, for violence was an underlying reality of both the making and the unmaking of empire, even when popular myth held that Britain, at least, managed a gentlemanly transfer of power to successor governments. To be sure, there was less bloodletting in the British experience than in the murderous wars in French Indochina and Algeria, but there are still stains on the record. Thomas points out, for instance, how London received word of massacres of indigenous people in Kenya and Nyasaland (Malawi) on almost the same day. Systematic torture by the French during the Algerian war was well known (though officially denied), and returned to haunt the French in public debates after new revelations and confessions in the press about fifteen years ago, but there were other incidents, too. In Madagascar, the French beat up rebels and threw their bodies into the ocean from aeroplanes, and in one incident killed 165 people on a train (203). Europeans were also victims of violence in attacks from anti-colonialist forces and, of course, in the forced exit of a million *pieds-noirs* in Algeria and the distressed departure of many British settlers from their colonies. There was, as well, much internecine violence carried out by nationalist factions against each other.

Thomas does not dwell overly on the violence, though never minimising its place in the chronicle of decolonisation, as his primary interest is in explaining why in some cases decolonisation was relatively freely conceded and, in others, it was so strongly resisted. This question takes him into the corridors of the political establishment, and the backrooms of various colonial interest groups, and he does a remarkable job of listening carefully to debates about what to do with empire in the post-war period. These included both ardent defences of empire and quiet admissions, by some, of the inevitability of withdrawal, as when a Foreign Office administrator noted in the 1940s that "the future is with the native peoples throughout the Far East" (128). What is striking, Thomas rightly judges, is how tenaciously the colonisers hung on to their colonies, and the efforts they made right up to the end to promote them. A jaunty poster titled "How to Join a Crack Force," advertising positions in the Palestinian Police Force just as the British were fighting Zionist and Arabic nationalism, provides an illustration (115), and there also exists a poster exhorting a Frenchman to 'be a man' and join up to fight in Indochina, suggestive of linked aspirations of individual and national *machismo* in the imperial endgame.

Several general points emerge from the babble of voices of ministers and permanent secretaries, governors and heads of fact-finding missions, though the men in power often seemed deaf to these points at the time. There were, to begin with, the inherent contradictions of colonialism, which became ever more glaring in the years after the war. The contrast between the combat for democracy in Europe, for which Britain and France had gone to war, and authoritarian rule overseas



was an issue that anti-colonialists could now underline. Similarly, the racist underpinnings of empire could not be sustained in the wake of the campaign against fascist racism in Europe. There were, however, other issues. Could European rule over colonies whose ties had been stretched (or in the case of France in Indochina, severed) during the war be restored? Would the European powers, faced with the exigencies of reconstruction, have the means to afford colonial administration, garrisoning, and economic and social development? The new humanitarian ideals announced in the United Nations charter and post-war pronouncements demanded greater efforts at education and health care, but also suggested greater enfranchisement of indigenous populations. What would the long-term effects be? A French statesman, Edouard Herriot, noted that if there were universal suffrage in a polity encompassing both metropolitan France and its empire, then the French mainland would be ruled by voters in the colonies (89). Such paradoxes exemplified the nature of a colonial rule that could no longer hope to uphold the old asymmetries between colonisers and colonised.<sup>24</sup>

Another issue that flows through the history of decolonisation, and Thomas's study, is the lack of clarity about policy, exemplified by the 'fight or flight' choice. There was, in short, no exit strategy from empire. Reading about the various manoeuvres attempted by policy-makers, one has the feeling of a great muddle. In 1946, for instance, the French resolved to reinstate their colonial dominion in Vietnam, which had been fully occupied by the Japanese in the closing months of the war, then became independent under the aegis of the Japanese, and subsequently was liberated largely by British and Chinese troops. The French, within just a few months, tried to reinstate the *status quo ante bellum* (including the illogical division of Vietnam into the two protectorates of Annam and Tonkin and the colony of Cochinchina), combated, then negotiated with and finally undermined Ho Chi Minh, wondered what to do with the compromised Emperor Bao Dai, recognised Vietnam as a unified 'associated state' of the French Union, and began what Thomas rightly labels a "premeditated" war (141) against the nationalists. A similar lack of clear direction is revealed elsewhere in the French and British empires, and indeed Thomas suggests that the confusion and hesitation between 'fight or flight' over the long-term period represents one of the key traits of decolonisation, emblematic of a vacillation that often became entwined with serious miscalculations about what to do.

Those two possibilities of staying or going, of course, covered a large number of potential strategies and would-be solutions. Independence might be granted sooner rather than later, though sometimes with disastrous results, as occurred with the partitions of the Indian subcontinent and Palestine. Or power could be gradually devolved to local leaders and institutions, as the British undertook to do in much of sub-Saharan Africa. Contrarily, the French tried to solder the colonies more securely to the *mère-patrie*, granting representation in the French parliament, though without permitting self-government in the African domains themselves. The French indeed (and, it might be noted, at the instigation of leftist politicians), did assimilate four of their *vieilles colonies* in the West Indies, South America, and the Indian Ocean fully into the Republic. Some of the indigenous leaders hoped that greater benefits could be secured inside the French orbit than by going it alone. There was even a move in Malta for the integration of that colony into Britain, a proposal to which London was signally unresponsive. There were plans for independence for individual colonies and, generally without

success, for the setting up of federations. Settler populations clamoured both for indefectible protection from their mother countries and for greater local autonomy. Yet if they felt threatened by majority rule, as in the case of Rhodesia, they proved willing to proclaim unilateral independence. In Algeria, diehard settlers engineered a rebellion against Paris in 1958, and once President Charles de Gaulle, having returned to power partly because of that rebellion, moved towards Algerian independence, some *pieds-noirs* mounted an attack on a French state accused of abandoning them, even to the point of trying to assassinate de Gaulle. Lack of clear direction at the centre mirrored discord on the periphery; confusion in policy reflected complicated demographic and political issues in the colonies that admitted of no easy solutions. Smaller territories were no less complicated than big ones; in islands such as Mauritius, Trinidad and Fiji, there were obdurate conflicts between different ethnic groups with competing claims to taking the reins of post-colonial power.

The story of decolonisation, thus, is complex, and Thomas weaves his way through the twists and turns with great aplomb, though readers will inevitably become a bit baffled by the plethora of names, political parties (and their abbreviations), policies, and events. One of the merits of his work is the close attention to the particularities of each situation, and Thomas provides excellent discussion of cases of decolonisation that remain little known, as with a chapter on Madagascar, and ones that have been largely forgotten, seen in the sections on Malaya and Cyprus. In considering topics that have often been treated with emotion and polemics, as with the Mau Mau rebellion (1952-1960), Thomas provides clear-headed reflection on deeds and misdeeds, the actions of soldiers, police, and officials on the ground and those in metropolitan capitals, and the difficult situations faced by all concerned. Thomas also very usefully reminds readers of the connections between decolonisation and the Cold War, the awkward (and ambiguous) relationships between Britain, France and the United States, and the tense relationship, too, between civilian and military authorities at home and in the colonies. His chapter on the Suez crisis of 1956, for instance, ably underscores how the invasion of Egypt was “a covertly planned Franco-British war of aggression against a sovereign state” (188) that was also a colonial war, undertaken by the French in the context of trying to keep Algeria French, and on the British side, by efforts to safeguard national interests in the Middle East.

Bringing together the French and British cases reveals both similarities and differences of policy and experience, and Thomas shows, in a way that has not always been realised before, how parallel the situations actually were in the two empires: India and Indochina, Algeria and Rhodesia, the black African colonies of each of the powers. Though it is not part of his brief, the histories of other colonial countries in the post-war period – Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal, and the United States – could also be compared, and the general hesitation between flight and fight can be seen in play in those instances as well.

Another ‘f’ might be added to ‘fight or flight’: fright. Britain and France, diminished if triumphant at the end of the Second World War, were frightened about their status in the new world, and the



spectre of decline continued to haunt them. One French politician had remarked that without its empire, liberated France would only be a corner of Europe, and Churchill famously declared that he had not become prime minister to preside over the dismemberment of the British empire. There was fear about the new superpowers that emerged, and the changes happening elsewhere in a world that seemed to some ripe for a domino-like fall of countries to Communism. But there was also fright about domestic situations: the power of the Communists in France, the uncertainty about Labour policy in Britain, surging movements of social and political contestation. And there was fright about violence and death: those attacks on settler populations still bound by the bloodlines of kinship, the deaths of soldiers sent to wage the little and big wars of empire, the spilling-over of unrest and violence to the home front and the streets of London and Paris. There was fear about the influx of 'coloured' populations from the colonies, horror at the effects of war and partitions in colonial domains, fear of radical anti-colonialist and nationalist ideologies, fear about what sort of legacies the colonialists would leave behind in Asia and Africa.

Thomas, who has chosen to concentrate on the decision-makers, might have allowed some further consideration of the grassroots. He points out that half of Britons surveyed in 1948 could not name a single crown colony, and that most of the French questioned in the late 1940s similarly manifested little interest in the empire (92). The imperial vision of most was that of stereotypes, coloured by the various fears immanent in public opinion. However, one would like to know more about the growing disinterest, the ways in which the imperialists made latter-day efforts to rally support, and how the colonies were (or were not) part of everyday life in the period of decolonisation. The new media of radio and then television brought colonial matters to public attention in a new fashion, and anti-colonialist indigenous figures - Nehru, Nkrumah, Ho Chi Minh - became more familiar in the sitting-rooms of France and Britain than individual 'native' figures had ever been before. Whether as heroes or villains, they replaced the old imperial celebrities such as David Livingstone, Cecil Rhodes and Marshal Hubert Lyautey, and there were few new pro-colonial heroes (bar, arguably, Albert Schweitzer). 'Happy Valley' in Kenya became a besieged redoubt for settlers, and Algiers was transformed from the myth of a sunny *pastis*-infused Mediterranean resort to a hellhole of bombs and barricades.

A word might also have been said about the substantial changes that took place in the British dominions during the post-war period. The move from colonial to dominion status in Ceylon is a fascinating example of 'what might have been', though ultimately dominion status, and some of the precepts, or at least ideals, of British constitutionalism were eventually left behind.<sup>14</sup> In Australia, by the 1970s and 1980s, though the Queen still reigned (as she still does), there had occurred a significant move away from the principles of dominion status dear to earlier statesmen such as Prime Minister Robert Menzies. The issue of the rights of indigenous peoples continued to provoke debate centred, in the Australian case, on such colonial legacies as the idea of *terra nullius* and the alienation of Aboriginal land rights.<sup>15</sup> South Africa, of course, is a case apart, but one not divorced from the general concerns and conflicts of decolonisation.

Thomas's book substantively comes to a close with the independence of Algeria and the unilateral declaration of independence in Rhodesia; by the early to mid-1960s, decolonisation seemed largely complete in the British and French empires. There is nevertheless another chapter to be written, one in which there reoccur some of the themes that Thomas introduces for the earlier episodes of decolonisation. In the 1970s and at the outset of the following decade, thirteen of Britain's remaining colonies gained independence, as did two of France's colonies; the New Hebrides, jointly administered by Britain and France, also became independent. Most of these were island states (or enclaves such as Belize, Brunei and Djibouti) that had earlier been considered too small in size or population, too remote or too resource poor to sustain independence. Moreover, Britain went to war with Argentina to protect its sovereignty over the Falkland Islands in 1982, and the French used the military and police to defeat moves towards independence by the indigenous Kanaks in New Caledonia in the mid-1980s.

In a general way, these tardy cases of decolonisation confirm some of the perceived differences between British and French policy. By the end of the 1970s, London seemed eager to divest itself of remnant possessions in the Pacific and Caribbean, sometimes even hurrying the process of disengagement, although Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher proved willing to fight to keep the Falklands. France only grudgingly relinquished the Comoros islands; only three of the four major islands in fact became independent as the Islamic Republic of the Comoros, while the fourth, Mayotte, remained French and is now a fully-fledged *département*. In the New Hebrides, the French tried to forestall or sabotage independence by supporting an anti-independence rebellion on the island of Espiritu Santo, though attempted secession failed. The would-be solution of partition recalls similarly aborted suggestions by Paris and the *pieds-noirs* to bring about a partition of Algeria, retaining enclaves for the European population and a Saharan territory for the French military. The more recent attempted miniature split-ups also recall, *mutatis mutandis*, the partitions of the Indian subcontinent and Palestine.

The struggle between pro- and anti-independence factions, and the different types of intervention by the French state, in New Caledonia eerily seemed in the 1980s to reproduce earlier patterns. Looking briefly at that situation shows how old lessons were not heeded. On one side of a virtual civil war stood the Caldoches, many descendants of French convicts transported in the last decades of the nineteenth century, a population that like the *Français d'Algérie* claimed rights to national citizenship and also to the land that they had occupied for more than a century. Alongside them were *métropolitains*, more recent arrivals attracted to the territory during a nickel boom, migrants from French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna - two other French Pacific territories - and a certain number of pro-French Kanaks, who might be compared to the *harkis* (Muslim soldiers fighting for France) in Algeria. The *Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste* pointedly took its name, and modelled some of its actions, on the group that had spearheaded independence in Algeria.

The New Caledonian *événements*, as they were euphemistically called - Thomas talks about the use

of euphemism to paper over violence and war in other colonial situations, such as the Malayan 'Emergency' - pitted two political forces and ideologies against each other: the idea of the territorial integrity of the French Republic and majority rule, on the one hand, versus the idea of indigenous rights to independence, on the other. That clash was not new, nor were the tactics pursued by each side. There were Kanak attacks on settlers' property and, occasionally, on their persons, and Caldoche attacks on Kanak villages, though never did the scale of violence match that of Algeria. The Kanaks tried to internationalise their campaign - Martin shows how effective this tactic had been elsewhere - by bringing calls for independence to the United Nations, non-governmental organisations and the press, presenting arguments that the French vehemently tried to counter. Some of the French, both in New Caledonia and especially in the metropole, supported the Kanaks, just as some had earlier supported Algerian independence. The dispute did not bring down the Republic, as had the Algerian war in 1958, but it did inflect politics in France, especially during the presidential election of 1988, a particularly tense time when French armed forces stormed a cave in which a group of Kanaks had secreted hostages. A number were killed in the attack, with charges of summary execution made against the French.

The role of the French state in New Caledonia at this time reflects Thomas's overarching point about flight or fight. Policy-makers talked tirelessly about the necessary strategic and commercial value of New Caledonia to France, all the while invoking *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*, which could only be secured, advocates of '*Calédonie française*' argued, by the maintenance of French control. President François Mitterrand, a key player (and ardent defender of empire as colonial minister in the mid-1950s), tried in vain to nurture a 'third force' between pro- and anti-independence groups, and bravely proposed that New Caledonia become independent 'in association' with France, a vague formula resurrecting a provision for 'associated states' in the French constitution of 1946. Such a solution incurred the wrath of the right-wing in France and the Caldoches in New Caledonia, who accused the Socialist president of abandoning French citizens and ceding French territory: echoes once again of Algeria. The plan was scuppered. With the advent of the Gaullist Jacques Chirac, first as prime minister 'cohabiting' with Mitterrand and subsequently as president, policy shifted, armed fight replacing timid flight. Chirac, who had been a young military officer in Algeria, allied himself closely with the Caldoches, poured troops into New Caledonia (and spread them around the territory in a policy of 'nomadisation' pioneered in Algeria). He devised new projects for economic development and social benefits for the disenfranchised, just as the Constantine Plan had promised only shortly before Algerian independence. He mounted an international propaganda effort, and resumed the suspended nuclear testing programme in Polynesia. In the end, there was further bloodshed, then negotiations, after a parliamentary election, by the Socialist Prime Minister Michel Rocard, leading to a modus vivendi between Caldoches and Kanaks. In an incident that harked back to the fratricidal warfare among Algerian nationalists, the leader of the *indépendantistes*, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, was assassinated by a renegade Kanak opposed to accommodation with Caldoches. There has been a 'moratorium' on the independence issue since the late 1980s, with plans for a referendum on an ill-defined 'sovereignty' at some point in the next few years. France's record in New Caledonia has been an aborted flight and a prolonged fight.<sup>111</sup>

Thinking about the post-1960s history of decolonisation in the British and French cases confirms many of Thomas's arguments, underlying the mess that decolonisation was, and the mess that was often left behind. Although there are many aspects to this story, Thomas's excellent volume provides a thorough and convincing argument about the role, in particular, of the British and French colonialists themselves, and the delusions and dilemmas they faced in trying to wind-up an empire that they inherited but were no longer able to control.

Review by Nicholas J. White, Liverpool John Moores University

On page 271 of *Fight or Flight*, Martin Thomas points out the unfortunate coincidence of Archbishop Makarios's incarceration in 1956 in a house in the Seychelles named *La Bastille*. Three years earlier, it was the failed Messalist march on the Place de la Bastille that had set off the shift of repressive measures in Algeria to the capital of metropolitan France. It is this eye for detail which makes Thomas's book such an engaging read. But it is also these cruel ironies which underline his central theme - the ways in which British and French experiences of decolonisation were intertwined, "their [late-colonial] successes or failures reverberating through one another's empires time and again" (349).

Throughout this ground-breaking study, Thomas is always mindful of the contrasts between British and French decolonisation. Cyprus was a special case given that Greek and Turkish involvement made Britain's eventual flight easier. The huge scale of the Algerian conflict dwarfed anything undertaken by the British, and the war's scarring of domestic politics and security operations was unprecedented. Indeed, by the 1960s, the severity of the Algerian campaign, and its internationalisation, convinced the British of the counter-productive nature of late-colonial repression. Britain's flight from India in the late-1940s, as opposed to France's fight in Indochina, was distinguished by five factors: consistent leadership, civil-military agreement, greater freedom of domestic political manoeuvre, failure of earlier initiatives, and hardnosed cost-benefit calculations. This painful learning curve, which France lacked, and the realisation that escape from empire (as in Palestine too) could have minimal metropolitan repercussions, made future British flights "immeasurably easier to contemplate" (118). In Indochina, meanwhile, an obvious difference with Malaya was Chinese communist logistical support for the insurgency from 1950, transmogrifying the Vietnamese communist leader Ho Chi Minh's tiger into an elephant to match the French mammoth. In other words, Malayan decolonisation was never as internationalised as Vietnam's. Concurrently, Anglo-French colonial collaboration was limited - the British instinctively distanced themselves from heavy-handed French fights, and 'perfidious Albion' was indeed complicit in the loss of the Levant.

Yet, what makes Thomas's study such an important and original contribution to the literature on European decolonisation is the subtle and deft identification of the commonalities. The British and the French, argues Thomas, travelled the end-of-empire highway together, not necessarily in tandem, but certainly in parallel lanes. For a remarkably long time after 1945, both London and Paris clung to

an “enduring belief that imperial possessions could – and should – be retained” (352). Drawing on his expertise on the 1920s and 1930s, Thomas also highlights how the shift from assimilation to association in the inter-war French empire was akin to Britain’s lauding of ‘indirect rule.’ Furthermore, the Amritsar massacre in India and the Saya San rebellion in Burma emphasise that “extreme state violence” (35) was not confined to the French inter-war colonial experience. After 1945, notwithstanding the big thinking inherent in the French Union, and its declared abolition of colonial status, there would actually be more change of personnel and practice in colonial administration in the British Empire. Even so, the imperial reformism and partnership rhetoric of London and Paris were very similar. Despite the apparent dichotomy between an integrationist French Union and a devolutionary Commonwealth, both embodied a remarkably ambitious “supra-nationalism” (95). Both “hit the same rocks” (74) when rhetoric was turned against reality by colonial peoples – trade unionists and nationalist politicians especially.

Drilling down to Southeast Asia, the Malayan Union demonstrated that Britain could plan just as grandly as the French, the difference lying only “in the speed with which Britain’s imperial rulers dropped such schemes once they became unworkable” (161). French violence to try and bring about the new order in the immediate post-war era – in Vietnam especially – was not that exceptional either when compared with Britain’s dirty war in Malaya. Indeed, the much-lauded ‘Malayan model’ was “far more violent” and “less cogent” than is usually appreciated (163). And, in both Malaya and Vietnam, left-of-centre regimes in London and Paris sanctioned the initial clampdown. Moreover, a commonality in both British and French counter-insurgency campaigns was that “local insurgents were variously treated as criminal, territories, rebel, or traitor; never as recognised combatants with commensurate rights under international law” (289). The frequent consequence was appalling human rights abuses, most infamously in Algeria and Kenya. The role of the subaltern ‘poor white’ in both French and British ‘settler’ in Africa is another important and overlooked similarity. On the other side, Algeria’s Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) applied “merciless violence” (311) akin to the Irgun in Palestine or the Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston (EOKA; National Organization of Cypriot Fighters). Meantime, the common fight at Suez in 1956, which turned out to be a damp squib due to President Dwight Eisenhower’s foreclosure, derived from a shared belief amongst inner circles in both London and Paris that “decisive action was essential to arrest their declining imperial position” (171). This combined with a common fear of an Arab domino effect, and shared war-time memories of the apparent folly of appeasement. Nor did the consequences of the botched Egyptian invasion dampen imperial determination: Britain shifted its military attention ‘east of Suez,’ and France stepped up the campaign in Algeria. For the British, too, in Kenya, counter-insurgency operations would be increasingly focussed in an urban setting. Meanwhile, Thomas successfully debunks the image of serene and controlled decolonisation for both Britain and France in West Africa, as “imperial managerialism” was “overtaken by events” (251). In the 1960s, right-wing Conservative Party support for Rhodesia’s white-dominated regime echoed the “political and inter-generational conflicts apparent in France at the close of the Algerian War” (341).

Exquisitely phrased throughout, the text is packed full of original insights – for example, on the significant role in decolonisation of the end of deference both in Europe and in the colonies, or, that

“[u]nderstanding the end of empire should not begin with the consequences of the Second World War but with the colonial crisis that prefigured it” (17). The important chapter on Madagascar demonstrates that the rebellion there – much neglected previously by historians of decolonisation – “set the Fourth Republic on the road to increasingly violent post-war fight strategies that tore apart not only Malagasy society but of Vietnam and Algeria as well” (205-6). On the Cold War dynamics of decolonisation, Thomas reminds us that the “Suez crisis... proved that Washington’s whip-hand packed a killer punch, but anti-imperial US interventionism remained the exception and not the rule” (19). Back to Vietnam, the Bao Dai ‘solution’ to give a quasi-independence to a new State of Vietnam “pointed up the inherent inadequacies of French Union reformism as a whole,” notably “the untenable halfway house between colonial control and national independence” (129). For the British in India and Palestine, meanwhile, “the unworkable combination of fight and flight strategies... contributed to worsening inter-communal clashes and the descent into partition and war soon afterwards” (96). Indeed, in the endgame of decolonisation, it was often competing nationalisms which were calling the shots. In Kenya, “the uncomfortable truth” was “that the war was increasingly waged between Kenyans, on Kenyan terms” (233-4). The Nyasaland Emergency of 1959, that prefigured the break-up of the white-dominated Central African Federation, demonstrates that “[f]ight and flight were becoming stark alternatives, not reciprocal elements that could be combined” (235). And, in his excellent conclusion, Thomas reminds us that the “bitterest” of decolonisation fights would morph into prolonged internationalised proxy wars from the 1960s to the 1990s (369).

At times, Thomas’s narrative reads like a political and military thriller – for example, in the discussion of the Algerian hijack of 1956 (in which the FLN’s exiled leadership en route to a peace conference in Spain was captured over Algerian airspace) (181-3). In synthesising a vast secondary literature, while also drawing upon extensive original research in the primary sources, this book will surely become a required jumping-off point for students and scholars wishing to tackle European decolonisation in the future. Indeed, there are themes and concepts here which can now be applied and tested in the Dutch, Portuguese, Belgian, and Spanish end-of-empire arenas.

It seems to me, however, that a central element in Britain’s ‘flight’ strategy is underplayed in Thomas’s analysis. By the 1960s, he tells us that Britain’s “determination to cling on eventually crumbled under the weight of hostile external scrutiny, the greater economic pull of European trade, and lack of public enthusiasm for costly colonial fights” (283). But surely a vital ingredient in the decolonisation soup was also the anaesthetic that was the Commonwealth ideal for British politicians, civil servants, business leaders, and public opinion alike. Into the 1970s, there remained an enduring vision that the UK could still play a ‘Third Force’ role in the world as *primus inter pares* in the ex-colonial club, and this was a discourse which curiously united both left- and right-wing political opinion. Indeed, the term ‘flight’ suggests a definite end-point and no turning back. But often this was not how the British conceived of their withdrawals from New Delhi, Kuala Lumpur, or Lagos. It was hoped that there would be ongoing constructive engagement as a prop to British global influence, explaining the great lengths gone to by the Attlee government to preserve India’s membership in the Commonwealth when it became a republic in 1949. In this regard, more perhaps could have been made of France’s attempts to salvage economic and strategic interests in its



decolonisation settlements. Fleetingly, we hear of “cherished base rights” in Morocco (182), and the antics of Jacques Foccart, the Gaullist networker and initiator of many a coup in post-colonial *Francafrique* (359). I wonder therefore how far the “dream of *Eurafrique*, the economic and cultural integration of France and [former] French black Africa” (261), superficially achieved with blanket political independence in 1960, sugared the pill of withdrawal from Algeria. Indeed, even in Algeria, where the FLN had clearly won and de Gaulle’s flight strategy was influenced by his embrace of a nuclear future, a lot of French negotiating energy was expended during 1962 attempting to secure military and commercial rights. But perhaps these are subjects for another comparative study of how British and French interests fared in the post-colonial situation, and how ex-imperial influence waxed and waned in the Commonwealth and in the Francophone world.

Review by Andrew Williams, University of St. Andrews

Martin Thomas is probably the best respected writer in Britain, and maybe in English, about the French Empire in the twentieth century. This book is the latest in a very impressive stream of tomes on the subject.<sup>44</sup> It is even more ambitious than all the others and an impressive synthesis of many years of research. I can think of few people who know their way round the archives in Aix en Provence better than Thomas. I therefore knew that I would find it convincing in its interpretation of French imperialism. But this new work is even more ambitious and compares the French withdrawal from Empire with that of the British, as if one or the other were not complicated enough. Of course the processes were contemporaneous, and from similar geographic parts of the world, even if from often very different cultural contexts. The great merit of this approach is that it enables the hoary old dichotomy of ‘British success; French disaster’ to be examined in the light, among other things, of the latest revelations from the ‘lost’ British Colonial files that have miraculously reappeared in recent times. They continue to emerge and it will no doubt take some time for the full implications of what they contain to be absorbed by scholars and survivors alike. Some small hint of what that might entail is still working its way through the British courts on the results of the repression of Mau Mau in Kenya in the 1950s.

The majority of readers of this book will, I suppose, inevitably come to it as students of British imperialism, and their views will have more weight than mine on that subject, I do not doubt. I personally share Thomas’s strange (for an ‘Anglo-Saxon’) admiration and interest in things French, though I am also, equally strangely maybe, a huge fan of the United States. It is often assumed in Britain and France alike that one is either an ‘Atlanticist’ or a ‘European,’ a view certainly held by Charles de Gaulle, for example. It is a pity that more ‘Anglo-Saxon’ Brits do not take more interest in French imperial history. Although of course we have many distinguished historians of France in Britain, the obligatory digs at alleged French lack of a sense of humour and over-intellectual pomposity always seem to emerge sooner rather than later. Thomas really takes the French seriously, and more of us should try it. The passages on the British Empire are very well done nonetheless and the sweep of the prose and the many summary asides make for a very entertaining read. The reader who wants to ignore the French could still read the ‘British’ bits with great profit.

What I like most about this rich and practically inexhaustibly interesting book is that it does not

dodge the moral issues that the end of the British and French Empires still manage to raise. But Thomas does not do this in the regrettable style of many 'committed' historians, with finger-wagging and outrage. He does so with a masterful command of the secondary and primary sources. The discussion of Kenya, for example, will be an invaluable reading for us all to provide to our students, summarizing but in no way traducing the excellent books on the 'hanged.'<sup>1</sup> I think in years to come Thomas's book might well change the course of the supertanker that is imperial history to give the French a better bill of health in some ways for their imperial exit than has been so far accorded to the British. To do that requires Thomas's far better knowledge of France than is usual for the average run of French - despising Anglophone historians. This comes out, for me at least, in a number of ways.

Most obviously I am indebted to Thomas for his exploration of themes and areas about which I know practically nothing at all. Chapter 7 on Madagascar is one such case in point. It was every bit as horrific to read as the much better-known stories of Kenya and Algeria, though both are also well done. One other, and not so obvious original feature, plucked out of the many examples here, that I also think might be of great use to teachers and students of international relations dealing with current 'imperial hangovers' involves the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement between Britain and France. The reverberations in the Middle East still evoke the secret agreement negotiated by Sir Mark Sykes and the French diplomat François Georges-Picot. These reverberations also illustrate the way that certain French scholars still use such experiences in their theorizing. One scholar whose work Thomas mentions is that of international political sociologist Bertrand Badie, whose work on the 'imported state' (368) he rightly stresses. It was unfortunately produced in a dreadful English translation but is still one of the most original books of International Relations theory of the past thirty years. I would add to the tally of references the new book by Badie, which takes the lessons of the post-imperial experience, for both sides, a step further.<sup>2</sup> The French experienced 'humiliation' in spades not just in their exit from empire but in many other respects (of which *le débâcle* of 1940 is the most obvious). In quitting the Empire, President de Gaulle hoped to help France recover its national identity as a sovereign state, not as a European 'unit' like the Benelux countries. De Gaulle was perhaps a lot more far-sighted than the British in their undignified division over simultaneously hanging on to the Commonwealth, nuzzling up to the US., and trying the same thing with Europe. The criticism that is now made of France is maybe because it has lost that Gaullist vision (though I think it fair to say that Badie has not) or Bergsonian *élan vitale*. This lack of mojo has led to the slew of sometimes appalling books like Eric Zémour's *Le suicide français*,<sup>3</sup> as well as to the rise of the *Front National*. De Gaulle would have been appalled at these betrayals of history and of the Republic that he did so much to uphold, unlikely as that looked in 1958.

One of the interesting questions that might have been asked by Thomas is how much the next 'Imperial' Power, the United States, learned from the experiences of the British and French? The parallels are of course not exact, the United States has occupied, or only intermittently, actual imperial territory.<sup>4</sup> But its actions have often been described, and not unfairly, as 'imperial'. De Gaulle played a very important role in Vietnam and Indochina more widely in the 1960s long after Dien Bien Phu in 1954. His approaches to China and his mediatory role in Paris (initially through the

North Vietnamese Trade Representative) and brokered by the Head of the *Asie - Océanie* Desk at the *Quai d'Orsay* Etienne Manac'h, were perhaps helped by his country's pre-existing fight and flight from South East Asia. De Gaulle's advice to Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon was pretty well spot on, if usually ignored because he had annoyed the Americans on so many other issues. But as Michael Beschloss's book on Johnson's telephone conversations shows, he often realised that de Gaulle was right even when he was forced by domestic opinion to denounce him, as over the recognition of China by France in 1964.<sup>44</sup> It took another student of Clausewitz, U.S. National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, another few years to do the same sensible thing. The French have maybe learned more from defeat and humiliation than have the 'Anglo-Saxons' from their 'victories'.

Equally the relationship of France to its former colonies has not been entirely disastrous. It is often averred that the Commonwealth somehow proves that Britain's post-colonial experience has been better than the French. I am not so sure. The Commonwealth is now a Potemkin village, whereas *La Francophonie* maybe still has more real substance. It is true that Prime Minister Tony Blair, and (more accurately maybe?) his Ambassador, to Sierra Leone did that country a service in ridding them of Revolutionary United Front leader Foday Sankoh. But the much derided French President François Hollande has actually done quite well in stopping some of the Islamist tide in Mali for the time being at least. I was in Paris in September 2014 when the mountain guide Hervé Gourdel was killed by Islamists in Algeria - the disgust about that action and the sympathy for him and his family was as real in Algeria as it was in France. The links between France and its former colonies are not all about remembering past wrongs, there are still clear mutual feelings of central importance. One could call this 'sensibility' or 'mutual self - interest' but for me it is as real as any imaginary concept such as the 'Anglosphere,' a concept that has been stretched far beyond its natural elasticity.

If I have one criticism of this book it is that it tries, and manages, to do too much. I found it took me far too long to read it. I could not skim it in my usual fashion, and I often found myself going back and reading the same chapter three or four times. This was not because it was hard going, but because the analysis is multi-layered in a way that few of us manage. I fear giving it to my students to read, though I shall, because I think they may just end up reading just one book, and it won't be mine.

Author's Response by Martin Thomas, University of Exeter

Reading the thoughtful and expansive comments of the three reviewers I'm struck by their shared ability to think big. Each approaches *Fight or Flight's* central preoccupations with when, how, and if empires end from distinct perspectives that take neither the origins nor the outcome of France and Britain's departure from colonial rule for granted. For this, as well as for their many other insights, I'm very grateful. A word of thanks must also go to the H-Diplo team for their patience and professionalism in putting these round-table discussions together. It is a privilege to be, in some small way, a part of this process.

*Fight or Flight* is a work of comparison. While I hope it is sensitive to the international and, still more so, the transnational currents that speeded decolonization's flow, the book's main objective is to bring British and French imperial breakdown into the same analytical frame. My suggestion is less that comparative approaches offer different perspectives; more that processes of decolonization were necessarily inter-dependent. At the most fundamental level communities living under foreign imperial flags were attuned to changes - political, cultural, and economic - within other societies across the global South whose experiences and concerns they shared. This is not to argue that colonial empires were brought down by some sort of mass mobilization of the world's colonized groups. It is, rather, to point out that neither empires, nor colonies, nor even colonial cities or rural districts were somehow hermetically sealed within an overarching framework of 'British' or 'French' imperial governance. Far from it: a defining characteristic of decolonization may, I think, be discerned in the vectors of political transmission that made successive imperial pull-outs so proximate in time and locality.<sup>[1]</sup> Decolonization was, at once, globalizing in its nature and proof positive that a new-style late-twentieth-century globalization was taking hold.<sup>[2]</sup> Anti-colonial alignments proliferated. People, ideas, and weapons circulated more rapidly. And popular revulsion at racially-configured systems of rule rendered colonialism increasingly untenable.<sup>[3]</sup>

Changing normative standards generated alternate, often improvised political solutions. British and French imperial reformism, self-interested and tardy according to its critics, could be ambitious, even generous in intent. But it was typically reactive. Integration was pursued alongside devolved autonomy. Schemes for federation in one region were devised as partition unfolded elsewhere. As these options suggest, plans for structural political change, for limited economic redistribution, for development projects and widening social provision, there certainly were. Indeed, many had a long gestation, taking outline form in the Depression years of the 1930s (when commensurate funding was missing) before their precise delineation in the Second World War years (when commensurate regional supremacy was lacking, especially in East Asia). Both the Malayan Union and the French Union offer examples of this process in action. In line with these ideas, a greater technocratic professionalism within expanding colonial bureaucracies also emerged from the ruins of World War. But what united British and French efforts to reconfigure their empires was that these plans and their enacting personnel found themselves overtaken by events - and very often by events in one another's colonial territories. In these fast-changing conditions, former indices of power between overbearing imperial nations and their internal colonial opponents no longer counted as much, if at all.

Each of the reviewers clearly discerns this diminishing official ability to set agendas for imperial reform, still less for withdrawal. As Aldrich suggests, remarkable in hindsight is the extent to which, , decolonization remained an unanticipated destination for imperial policy-makers, metropolitan politicians, and colonial administrators. In Nicholas White's view, although instances of Franco-British imperial rivalry drove the two imperial giants apart, particularly in the Middle East of the late 1940s, common challenges of anti-colonial insurgency, settler revolt, and international criticism corralled them back along parallel tracks thereafter. For Andrew Williams, closer examination of the supposed dichotomies between Britain's supposedly smoother journey from empire next to France's

harder-fought decolonization tends to collapse the distinctions rather than amplify them. His image of vast imperial super-tankers is a striking one. Differences of speed, even of chosen end-point there might be, but, in both cases, manoeuvrability was hampered by a forward momentum that was hard to reverse.<sup>[20]</sup>

Another of the book's facets that draws comments from each of the reviewers is the place of violence within the decolonization process. Discussion of decolonization's wars, its violent encounters and rights abuses, risks both historical distortion and analytical tautology. Moving from one imperial zone to another, violence might seem to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. In the late 1940s much of South and South East Asia was descending into the mass killing of partition and post-partition, insurgency, and war just as trade unionists, veterans, women's groups, and students felt sufficiently empowered to advance more or less peaceful claims for greater rights and entitlements in much of sub-Saharan West Africa.<sup>[21]</sup>

As these contrasts indicate, merely asserting that decolonization either provoked violence or fuelled pre-existing inter-ethnic conflicts does not take us very far. On the one hand, organized violence, whether perpetrated by imperial security forces or their anti-colonial opponents, could be staggeringly harsh. Yet it was also episodic. Its transformative power might thus lie in the original severity of such violent episodes or in the reduction of the periods of 'normality' between them. Herein lies the tautology. Episodes, their frequency increasing, were *ipso facto* less episodic, instead producing conditions of permanent danger. Although the local dynamics of colonial and anti-colonial violence might differ in these senses, either could generalize insecurity and fear. On the other hand, less pre-conceived violence in the form of market collapse and consequent food denial or inadequate provision for civilian populations caught in the crossfire of rebellion and war could be devastating. The Bengal famine of 1943-44 and the North Vietnamese famine that immediately followed took far more lives than security force bullets during Indian partition or the Indochina War. And as the previously mentioned East Asian-West African contrasts imply, for every regional example of intensely violent decolonization there are others where armed conflict was substantially avoided. Perhaps most salient in any comparative study of empire disintegration is the frequency with which the principal violence actors involved were drawn, not from imperial 'mother countries' but from loyalist populations in the colonial regions worst affected by dissent and disorder. Again, as the reviewers note, it is this internecine, civil war dimension to the violence of decolonization that I have tried to place at the centre of the analysis.<sup>[22]</sup>

This brings me to a couple of the ideas that inform *Fight or Flight*, about each of which the reviewers have something to say. First is what might be called the paradox of power. Insofar as British and French imperial collapse quickened in the years immediately after World War II, one consequence was a sharper disjuncture between the deepening of democracy and redistributionist economics at the metropolitan centres of empire next to the repressive authoritarianism symptomatic of 'states of emergency' or other quasi-wars in colonial regions from North Africa to East Asia. For all the talk of

developmental ambition, raising colonial living standards, and widening political inclusion, for both Britain and France, post-war reconstruction at home and in their empires came loaded with the same ethnic presumptions that informed colonial governance. European populations always ranked first in the hierarchies of need. Intrinsically unsustainable in the long term, this disjuncture between words and deeds acquired greater visibility - and attracted heightened transnational criticism - thanks to the human rights 'surge' of the late 1940s that extended the purview of international organizations and the international law they upheld.<sup>[25]</sup> (While I subscribe broadly to this view, my suggestion, as White points out, is that powerful disintegrative processes were already catalysed by the global economic crisis of the 1930s.)

Here, we come to the second idea, captured in the shorthand phrase, the paradox of persistence. The more any analyst peers beneath the thin veneer of colonial political control, the more important become other factors in explaining why British and French empire endured. Diverse forms of cultural connection and new paths of empire migration served as unifiers even as formal imperial rule disintegrated. The claims making of colonial interest groups kept numerous radicals inside the imperial tent, determined to secure a better deal from imperial governments by insisting that reformist rhetoric be enacted. Meanwhile, the loyalist auxiliaries that shouldered greater burdens of policing and repression became decisive agents of change, and very often the principal power brokers as formal independence loomed larger.<sup>[26]</sup>

With these points in mind, Aldrich's suggestion that grassroots perspectives merit closer attention is well taken. Aldrich's comment refers, I think, to metropolitan public opinion. Because decolonization was nominally pursued or resisted in the name of the British or French peoples (and sometimes in the name of entire empire populations as well), the metropolitan public sphere necessarily became a key rhetorical battleground. The depth of attachment to empire, of popular imperialism, has also generated more literary output than any other aspect of empire history since new imperial history took its cultural turn.<sup>[27]</sup> The issue has also been viewed from multiple angles of gender, age, class, and region. Questions of memory and memorialization have lent analytical weight to post-colonial perspectives, deepening our understanding of how decolonization was articulated, processed, or even invented as a holistic concept.<sup>[28]</sup> I hope I have done justice to this work in *Fight or Flight* but, as Aldrich rightly notes, more could have been said. My main objectives in focusing on the reaction of domestic publics to crises of decolonization were perhaps rather deterministic. In essence, they were threefold. First was to highlight the co-existence of apparent opposites. Post-war Britain and post-war Britons could, for instance, be fervently patriotic, even imperialistic, and yet simultaneously uninterested in empire governance and relatively unconcerned by the actuality of decolonization. The 'loss' of India, even the humiliation and tragedy of the Palestine imbroglio, burned brightly but quickly in domestic politics, generating more heat than light. Both were soon eclipsed by more parochial material concerns in an age of acute post-war austerity. The scandals of maltreatment, mass detention, and even mass killing in Malaya, Cyprus, Kenya, and elsewhere aroused passionate, but narrow criticism. Indeed, domestically at least, the scandal surely lies in the relative ease with which British society convinced itself that colonial human rights abuses were peripheral and exceptional rather than systemic and recurrent.



However one measures it, public opinion is rarely static. My second aim in tackling levels of metropolitan public engagement with decolonization was, thus, to highlight what Gil Merom identified many years ago as the normative gap between colonial administrations that sanctioned extreme violence in defence of empire and domestic publics for whom such activities appeared increasingly repugnant.<sup>[22]</sup> My sense, for instance, is that French society's growing revulsion at army and police dirty war practices in the Algerian war of independence, not to mention at the loss of young conscripts sent to take part, was as significant as the *Front de libération nationale's* (FLN) undoubted success in internationalizing their cause by publicizing the horrors of such French tactics.<sup>[23]</sup> No assessment of decolonization could be complete without focusing, in addition, on the retrospective challenges, even traumas, of remembering what was done in the final years of empire. This, in some ways, is a story that can, as yet, be partially written at best. As Williams's discussion of the so-called 'migrated archive' of tens of thousands of British colonial documents makes plain, even the official record of decolonization – incomplete and analytically problematic as it is – has become a contested artefact.<sup>[24]</sup> Its contents, particularly those relating to torture during Mau Mau, are one source of contemporary argument and bitter legal challenge. The suspicion that much remains hidden is another. Much of this archive, originally stored at Hanslope Park in the UK, relates to security questions and instances of maltreatment that have served – and surely will serve – as the basis for compensation claims. Public appreciation of their scale and significance is in its infancy.<sup>[25]</sup> All of which is to say that, while I tried to write *Fight or Flight* as dispassionate history, it collides with present-day controversy throughout.

Finally, then, a few words of assent in response to comments made by individual reviewers. Aldrich's lament for greater coverage of the decolonizations, particularly the French one, still to unfold in the 1970s and 1980s is well justified. One does not have to dig very deep, as he points out, to see the connections between the repertoires of protest adopted by Kanak social movements in New Caledonia and those of Algeria's FLN. In the British case, the Falklands War, quixotic in so many respects, must surely be framed imperially in order to understand it. For all that, my book and my expertise reach their limits in a slightly earlier period with the sixties drawing to a close. White's colourful phrase suggesting that I spice up Britain's decolonization soup with the "anaesthetic that was the Commonwealth ideal" is equally apposite. The quasi-imperial character of Britain's post-independence relationships with numerous former dependencies was, and is, nourished by notions of shared pasts, shared cultures, and shared values. Ceremonial attachments and the fixity of purpose they imply still matter.<sup>[26]</sup> British commercial and financial relationships forged before formal decolonization and sustained in its aftermath, about which both White and Sarah Stockwell have written so insightfully, add real substance to the decorousness of Commonwealth connection.<sup>[27]</sup> Much the same might be said of the networks of French strategic and commercial influence central to *Francafrique* thinking, as well as to the cultural and linguistic attachments of the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*.<sup>[28]</sup> Here, too, the vitality of post-colonial partnerships belies the contestation of earlier decolonization. *Fight or Flight* has things to say about all of these points, particularly in its final chapter. And I share White's conviction that the greater the evidence that Britain's imperial subjects wanted out of empire, the greater the countervailing tendency among official and unofficial opinion to seek refuge in notions of Commonwealth unity. India's all-important

decision to join the organization, and thereby hasten its 'de-Dominionization,' was surely critical here.<sup>[4]</sup>

If India's magnanimity was vital, so, too, was that of the United States. Here we come to a last point raised by Williams: the centrality of U.S. thinking, U.S. actions, and U.S. self-restraint in the face of British and French empire breakdown. What Michael Hunt identified several years ago as the "promise-performance gap" between Washington's notional support for colonial freedom and its indulgence towards British and, to a lesser extent, French imperialism was mirrored in post-war U.S. thinking about self-determination, which Brad Simpson characterizes as a "layered conception of sovereignty" contingent on the abilities and willingness of the people involved to adhere to western standards and political loyalties.<sup>[3]</sup> In practice, the United States usually worked with its British and French partners to ease their withdrawal from empire, clearing a path for U.S. dominance while, for the most part, avoiding open confrontation. Suez was the exception, not the rule. Even so, the palpable *schadenfreude* with which Harold Wilson's government reacted to America's deepening crisis in Vietnam was unsurprising. More serious, as Williams reminds us, was U.S. President Lyndon Johnson's inability to act on French President Charles de Gaulle's efforts to de-escalate the developing crisis in Vietnam. Whether more a matter of disinclination than inability, Johnson's inflexibility, as Williams further comments, was, in part, a consequence of America's involvement in France's earlier decolonization from South East Asia.<sup>[4]</sup>

The end of empire, as these comments indicate, is far from over. Its processes and consequences are immensely rich avenues of study; my thanks again to the reviewers for confirming how much this remains the case.

## Notes

[1] J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (London, Vintage Books, 2004 (first published in 1980), 147.

[2] J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (London, Vintage Books, 2004 (first published in 1980), 169.

[3] Christopher Goscha, "'So what did you learn from war?' Violent decolonization and Paul Mus's search for humanity," *South East Asia Research*, vol. 20, no. 4, (December 2012), 569-593.

[4] See, among others. Ben Macintyre, "50 years later: Britain's Kenya cover-up revealed ," *The*

Times, (5 April 2011), <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/uk/article2972562.ece>

[5] Alexander J. Motyl, « Is Everything Empire? Is Empire Everything? » *Comparative Politics*, vol. 38, no. 2 (January 2006), 229-249.

[6] Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War, 1940-45* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1998); *The French North African Crisis: Colonial Breakdown and Anglo-French Relations, 1945-1962* (Palgrave-Macmillan, London, 2000); *International Diplomacy and Colonial Retreat* (ed. With Kent Federowich) (Frank Cass, London, 2001); *The French Empire Between the Wars: Imperialism, Politics and Society* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2005); *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2007), *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe's Imperial States, 1918-1975* (with Bob Moore and L.J. Butler) (Arnold, London, 2008); *The French Colonial Mind: Violence, Military Encounters, and Colonialism* (ed.) (2 vols, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 2011); and *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918-1940* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012).

[7] On the thorny issue of citizenship, rights and colonialism in the French empire, see a new study by Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2014).

[8] Harshan Kumarasingham, *A Political Legacy of the British Empire: Power and the Parliamentary System in Post-Colonial India and Sri Lanka* (I.B. Tauris, London, 2013), charts the different itineraries of two South Asian states.

[9] See James Curran and Stuart Ward, *The Unknown Nation: Australia after Empire* (Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 2010).

[10] On the current situation in the French territories of the South Pacific, see Denise Fisher, *France in the South Pacific: Power and Politics* (Australian National University Press, Canberra, 2013).

[11] For example: *The French Empire at War, 1940-45*, (Manchester University Press, 1998); *The French Empire between the Wars: Imperialism, Politics and Society*, (Manchester University Press, 2005); *The French Colonial Mind: Violence, Military Encounters, and Colonialism*, (Lincoln, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

[12] For a useful summary see: Joanna Lewis, "Nasty, Brutish and in Shorts? British Colonial Rule, Violence and the Historians of Mau Mau," *Round Table Journal*, 96(389), 2007, 201 - 223.

[13] Bertrand Badie, *Le Temps des humiliés*, (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2014)

[14] Eric Zémour, *Le suicide français*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2014

[15] Of course the United States did occupy the Philippines from 1898 until 1946 and various Pacific islands at various times.

[16] Michael Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2002).

[17] The emergence and actions of the Non-Aligned Movement enhanced these processes of transmission, see Christopher J. Lee, "Between a Moment and an Era: The Origins and Afterlives of Bandung," in Christopher J. Lee (ed.), *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Afterlives* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 1-41.

[18] This is something I've explored with my colleague, Andrew Thompson in Thomas and Thompson, "Empire and Globalisation: from 'High Imperialism' to Decolonisation," *International History Review*, 36:1 (2014), 1-29.

[19] A.G. Hopkins, "Rethinking Decolonization", *Past and Present*, No. 200 (2008), 215-16.

[20] Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), 82-3, 97-100, 114-15.

[21] For the French West African counter-example, see Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014).

[22] Here I'm indebted, like many scholars of decolonization's micro-violence, to Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[23] I borrow the phrase from Eric D. Weitz, "The Human Rights Surges of the 1940s and 1990s: A Commentary on Margaret E. McGuinness and William A. Schabas," *Diplomatic History*, 35:5 (2011): 793-6.

[24] For clear evidence of this process in British-ruled Kenya, see Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[25] The extent of and insights from this work are well summarized by the contributors to Andrew S. Thompson (ed.), *Britain's Experience of Empire in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[26] Crucial works on the French side of this equation are Robert Aldrich, *Vestiges of the Colonial Empire in France: Monuments, Museums and Colonial Memories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005); Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization*.

[27] Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), especially chapter 3.

[28] The now classic iteration of the internationalization thesis is Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); for further insights on the UN, NGOs, and the internationalization of rights abuses, see Fabian Klose, *Human Rights in the Shadow of Colonial Violence: The Wars of Independence in Kenya and Algeria* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2013).

[29] Mandy Banton, "Destroy? 'Migrate'? Conceal? British Strategies for the Disposal of Sensitive Records of Colonial Administrations at Independence," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 40:2 (2012), 323-37.

[30] David Anderson, "Mau Mau in the High Court and the 'Lost' British Empire Archives: Colonial Conspiracy or Bureaucratic Bungle?", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 39:5 (2011), 699-716.

[31] Particularly so in relation to Britain's monarchy, see Philip Murphy, *Monarchy and the End of Empire: The House of Windsor, the British Government and the Post-War Commonwealth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), especially chapters 6-8.

[32] Nicholas J. White, *British Business in Post-Colonial Malaysia, 1957-1970: Neo-Colonialism or Disengagement?* (London: Routledge, 2012); Sarah Stockwell, *The Business of Decolonization: British Business Strategies in the Gold Coast* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[33] Pivotal here, as Andrew Williams notes, was the figure of Jacques Foccart. See Jean-Pierre Bat, *Le syndrome Foccart: La politique française en Afrique de 1959 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

[34] The term derives, in a different context, from Kosmas Tsokhas, "Dedominionization: The Anglo-Australian Experience, 1939-1945," *Historical Journal*, 37:4 (1994), 861-83.

[35] Michael Hunt, "The decolonization puzzle in US policy," in David Ryan and Victor Pungong (eds.), *The United States and Decolonization: Power and Freedom* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2000), 207-14; Brad Simpson, "The United States and the Curious History of Self-Determination," *Diplomatic History*, 36:4 (2012), 680.

[36] A legacy brilliantly elucidated in two recent works: Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).